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AUTHOR Just, Helen D.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some theories and approaches for better integrating minority students into college environments for creating a good "fit" for an increasingly diverse student body, and thereby increasing student retention. Several factors are found to affect diversity: an increased proportion of minorities; an increase in the average age of students; and the large number of employed students. While feeling a part of the campus community is important to all students, minority students face unique problems and have lower graduation rates. The study suggests that a significant, if simple, way to assist adjustment to college for all students, but particularly for minorities, is to encourage the maintenance of attachment to significant people from home. That has not often been the policy of colleges in recent years, but research suggests that connection to home has a significant impact on academic and intellectual development and on commitment. Aggressive recruiting of minority students will create a larger community of similar students, with less chance of their feeling isolated. Similarly, recruiting minority faculty and staff members will provide role models. A diverse faculty can be effective in combating racial prejudice, together with appropriate attitudes of administrators. (Contains 36 references.) (RH)

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Minority Retention in Predominantly White Universities and Colleges: The Importance of Creating a Good "Fit"

Helen D. Just, Ph.D.

St. Edwards University

Austin, Texas

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Abstract

Dramatic increases in the minority population in this country has created a pressing problem for predominantly White colleges and universities, who will enroll over 80% of these minority students, many of whom will be coming from lower economic levels. Faced with an increasingly hi-tech workplace, graduates of all ethnicities are expected to graduate equipped to fill the jobs of the future. This means that predominantly White colleges must find better ways of integrating minority students into college environments and thereby increasing retention. Theories of retention, as they relate to minority students, are discussed. Concrete suggestions are posited for creating a good "fit" for a rich diversity of students.

Minority Retention in Predominantly White Universities and Colleges: The Importance of Creating a Good "Fit"

A decrease in federal funding to postsecondary institutions and less financial aid to students since the 1970's has provided much of the impetus to make student retention a priority for college administrators and student life personnel on most compuses. If colleges cannot offer large financial aid packages to entice new students to enroll, then the logical answer to decreasing admissions is to encourage current students to continue to reenroll for subsequent semesters. This is occurring on traditionally Black college campuses as well as on predominantly White campuses. The desire to increase student reenrollment has spawned a plethora of research on college student retention and the subsequent development of predominantly freshman programming to encourage students to persist to graduation.

Most theorists have agreed that person-environment "fit" is an important aspect of retention. Feeling a part of the campus community is important to all students, no matter what their ethnic background. In fact, many of the retention efforts are applicable to all students. However, minority students sometimes face unique problems not experienced by students of the dominant culture. With dramatic increases in the minority population overall in this country and the importance of preparing all of our people to take their places in an increasingly hi-tech world, it is imperative that we focus on ways to integrate minority students into our college environments. In addition, since over 80% of minority students will attend colleges that are predominantly White, it is crucial that we explore ways of creating a good "fit" for minority students on mostly Anglo campuses.

Problems and challenges

College campuses today are becoming more diverse in many ways. The undergraduate population is changing. Figures show that the average age of students is increasing. In 1993 more than 40% of all undergraduates were at least 25 years old. In fact, 27% were at least 30 years old. In addition, almost half of the students attending college in 1993 were also employed,

many of them full-time (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). This presents challenges for institutions of higher education in that they need to serve an increasingly diverse population. This requires the designing of programs that fit the needs of so varied a student body.

It may be helpful to take a look at what is happening in this country demographically and economically. In 1988 the American Council on Education and the Education Commission of the States published results of their study of socioeconomic, educational, and health indicators in the United States. These findings indicated that economic levels for most ethnic minorities was disproportionately low (as cited in Castle, 1993). Castles argues that these figures are particularly relevant for Hispanics and African Americans, who often live in urban areas. Demographic predictions are that these two minorities will compose one third of the population in the U.S. by the year 2010. By extension, the minority student-age population will also increase from "20% to 39% from 1985 to 2020" (Castles, 1993).

The 1996 Chronicle of Higher Education: Almanac Issue stated that from 1984 to 1994 the number of White undergraduates increased by 5.1%. Minority students, on the other hand, increased 61% (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1998). What we are facing, then, is a large increase in Minority students who are coming from lower economic levels. Education certainly provides the hope for upward mobility. It is therefore particularly important that we formulate a plan for drawing these minority students into higher education. In addition, the Office of Technology Assessment (U.S. Congress, OTA, 1990), which compiles research for the government, has indicated that the the majority of well-paying jobs in the future will be in the high-technology category. These are jobs that will require higher levels of education. In other words, the higher paying jobs of the future will be competitive, and they will require higher levels of skills and education (Glazer, 1989). This same report predicts that by the year 2000, "African Americans and Hispanics alone are expected to account for half of all new workers hired, nearly three times the 1988 number" (Nussbaum, 1988). Also, job growth is predicted to be greatest in the south and west, two areas that include large numbers of potential minority students in their populations (McCool, 1984). Therefore, the mandate is clear. We must find a way to educate all of our

people, including minorities, so that the work force will keep pace with the demands of the job market. To do so will help insure a strong national economy, as well as promote a better lifestyle for all peoples.

But there are challenges. We have known for some time that college graduation rates for Anglos and minorities in U.S. institutions differ fairly dramatically. The 1995 Almanac of Higher Education reports that while the percentage of Hispanic, American Indian, and African American students attending 4-year institutions steadily increased from 11.5% to 14% during the period from 1982 to 1992, overall graduation rates were still down (Zea, Reisen, Beil, Caplan, 1997). In fact, only 10% of all the college graduates in 1992 were members of these three minority groups. Attendance and graduation rates of all non-Asian minority students is declining. Fewer and fewer minority persons are finishing college, but at the same time, minorities make up an increasing percentage of the work force.

A few more facts: African Americans and Hispanics are primarily enrolled in community colleges and two-year institutions, and yet the graduation rate for these two groups is lower than other ethnic groups (McCool, 1984). They have high dropout and withdrawal rates, as well as low transfer rates to four-year colleges and universities (Astin, 1982). Going higher up the educational ladder, a low percentage of Hispanic and African American students go on to graduate school, particularly in the areas of mathematics, science, and engineering, the high-technology areas so necessary for landing high-paying jobs in the future (Tobias, 1990).

What is causing this dismal state? That is a very complicated question, beyond the scope of this paper, but a few points need to be raised. To start with, all students, whether they are Anglo or minority, are increasingly likely to enter college underprepared. This may be even more true for minority students. At the very least, students are entering college at varying levels of preparedness (Castles, 1993). As a result, many students are at a disadvantage before they ever attend their first class. It must be remembered that the problem of minority retention starts long before students enroll in college, but blaming elementary and secondary schools for attrition tendencies will do little to solve this dilemma.

Colleges must aggressively work to promote retention after students enroll. They must take students wherever they are academically and move them forward. It is crucial that students persist to graduation, and colleges must recognize that persistence for minority students is very likely to be a different process from that of Anglo students. In fact, the process may be different from one minority group to another. Therefore, programming that is effective in retention efforts for Anglo students may not always be effective for minority students. An understanding of general retention theories and minority retention theories, in particular, is a good starting point.

Theories of retention

A number of researchers have proposed models of retention in postsecondary education (e.g., Astin, 1975, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1998; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Tinto's model is the most comprehensive and is well known to those in the field of retention study. In it he talked about the student's reasons for choosing to leave the institution before completing a degree. He listed three areas predominantly that contributed to retention: educational goals and aspirations, commitment to the institution, and personal attributes (e.g., family background characteristics, skills and abilities, and prior educational experiences).

Tinto revised his theory a number of times, in response to critical research and comments by other researchers (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). In its latest form, he stressed that congruence with the college or university's academic and social communities is critical for the student (Zea, et al., 1997). He referred to this as a "sense of belonging" (Tinto, 1993). In other words, the student who feels an integral part of campus life will be more likely to persist. It is absolutely essential that the student be fully integrated into the institution's daily life in order to increase the chances of retention. Congruence has the aditional effect of reinforcing educational goals and even affects the student's commitment to the institution. Students who do not feel integrally "connected" to the college will be more likely to leave, experiencing a decrease in commitment to educational goals, and certainly feel that the institution does not care about them.

Many minority students in predominantly White colleges and universities face difficulties in adjusting to their new environment (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Fleming, 1981; Jay & D'Adugelli,

1991). It is not difficult to see why. They experience all of the normal developmental changes associated with late adolescence for students of virtually every culture in this country, and in addition they have to learn to adjust within another culture (Zea, et al., 1997). The universal challenges of developing a sense of personal identity, separating from parents, determining personal values, formulating individual goals, dealing with relationship and sexuality decisions are surely complicated during this period. The best adjusted late adolescent will probably struggle. It is considered a normal developmental process. Theorists from Erikson (1968) to Marcia (1966, 1970, 1980) have examined the progression that late adolescents usually experience.

For minority students comes the additional difficulty of dealing with a college racial climate that may not be conducive to their full integration. It may be difficult for them to adjust socially to a college environment that is predominantly White. They many experience interpersonal tensions in dealing with White students and faculty. They may even be faced with actual occurrences of racism and discrimination (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Hurtado (1994) noted that the racial climate on campus affects nearly every aspect of adjustment for Latino youth. The perception of a hostile climate on campus can directly affect Minority students' sense of belonging. This can have an impact on their performance. Oliver, Rodriguez, and Mickelson (1985) found that Blacks were more likely than Chicanos to feel alienated and perform poorly. Bennett and Okinaka (1990) noted that among Hispanic and White undergraduates, students who felt the most alienated were most likely to drop out. These researchers also stated that even Asian students, who have relatively high college retention rates, still report strong feelings of social alienation and are often very dissatisfied with their college experience.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that racial climate continues to be a factor in minority adjustment beyond the freshman year. Their findings indicate that Latino students' experiences of a hostile racial climate on campus during their sophomore year had a negative effect on their sense of a good "fit" during their junior year. In other words, simply making it through the freshman year did not assure a sense of community for minority youth as they entered their second and third

years in college. The sense of alienation that they felt appeared to be a big factor in their successful or unsuccessful adjustment.

Retention models for Minority students

In the early 1980's Bennett (1984) conducted a study at Indiana University, in which she found that the attrition rate for Blacks was 62%, 38% for Hispanics, 30% for Whites, and 28% for Asians. In this study she developed the Conceptual Model of Black Student Attrition. Three variables were predicted to have direct effects on attrition, or intent to drop out: satisfaction, college GPA, and "less trauma." Bennett expected that collegiate positive interracial contact, stage of ethnicity, and preparedness would have a direct positive influence on the student's experience of "less trauma." She also included background variables in her model, predicting that precollege positive interracial contact would positively affect collegiate interracial contact, as well as stage of ethnicity. All in all, her revised model of Black student attrition contained eleven predictors, with intent to complete a college degree as the outcome variable.

The strongest points in Bennett's model seem to be the emphasis on openness to interracial contact, along with college adjustment (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990). Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that satisfaction, openness, and college adjustment were important in the retention of Asian, Black and White freshmen. It was interesting that for Hispanic students none of the model's variables were related to their decision to drop out or persist, although this may have been due to a relatively small Hispanic sample (n=76). The researchers also raised the possibility that there may have been differences between male and female Hispanics that might have canceled each other out.

More important than any of the specific results of this study is the possibility that there may not be only one model of retention that would fit all Minority students. In fact, more recent research studies have attempted to present other models (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992). However, one aspect of all the models, whether for the dominant culture or minority cultures, seems to emerge as important, and that is congruence or the sense of integration the student perceives within the college millieu. That sense of integration may

vary by group. Hurtado and Carter (1997) have pointed out that integration may "mean something completely different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education" (pp. 326, 327). One of the assumptions of the concept of integration is that the cultural/ethnic differences of the minority group should somehow be diminished as the group acculturates to the dominant culture, and only then will the minority group be successful in their integration. This idea is very similar to the old assimilation theory, in which members of a newcomer group are changed from outsiders to insiders, with full membership in the dominant group (McLemore & Romo, 1998). By extension then, assimilated group members would lose most of the characteristics of their original culture and embrace the new culture.

Taking a more pluralistic approach, Tinto responded to this idea by talking about "membership" instead of integration. He said that the "the concept of 'membership' is more useful than 'integration' because it implies a greater diversity of participation" (Tinto, 1993: 106). The interesting thing here is that this distinction may free students to be a part of a wide variety of groups on campus without having to conform to a set of norms that usually are set by the dominant group as the definition of successful adjustment. Hurtado and Carter (1997) point out that this distinction may be helpful in understanding the ability of minority students to be a part of several worlds at once. In fact, they are routinely called upon to live in several worlds: their own culture as well as the culture of the dominant group on campus.

Interestingly, most measures of membership or integration have included specific campus activities, saying, in effect, that the student is adjusted if he/she is involved in sports activities, Greek organizations, or campus clubs. Such lists have often omitted minority and ethnic organizations, religious organizations, or opportunities for community service and activism. This could be a major factor in study results indicating that constructs of social integration often are significantly related to adjustment and retention for White students but not for minority students. It is certainly possible that membership in traditionally White clubs and activities alone may not offer minority students the support that they need to feel successful on the college campus. In fact, they

may be much more apt to feel good about their college experience if they can also participate in groups outside the mainstream that give them affirmation and a sense of belonging.

For example, Latino students in Hurtado and Carter's study felt "at 'home' in the campus community" because they maintained "interaction both within and outside the college community" (Hurtado & Carter, p. 338). They enjoyed their affiliation with social-community organizations and religious organizations. It helped them to fit in on campus because it gave them the support they needed, as well as maintained a link to the communitites they belonged to before entering college. Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, and Terenzini (1995-1996) presented another example. They found that belonging to a fraternity had a significant positive effect on the cognitive growth of White males but only a minimal positive effect on Black males. Similarly, variables that predicted socio-cognitive growth for Anglo-American students did not seem to be related to growth for Chicano students (Durham, Hays, & Martinez, 1994).

Hurtado and Carter (1997) have developed a Model of Sense of Belonging that can be applied to minority students. It is a longitudinal model which includes precollege variables (selectivity, gender, academic ability), first year variables (ease of transition: cognitive mapping, managing resources, family support/independence), second year variables (hostile climate: experienced discrimination, campus tension), and third year variables (sense of belonging: part of the campus community, member of the campus community, sense of belonging to campus community). This could be an important step forward in the research on minority retention for a number of reasons. First of all, the Hurtado and Carter model is a longitudinal model, one that conceptualizes the sense of belonging and subsequent adjustment and retention as occurring over time. Successful adjustment does not occur all at once. Some students that enroll in college may adjust within the first six weeks, but for many more the process takes much longer. Indeed, some students still do not feel that they "fit" in even after being a part of their college for two and three years.

Second, the Hurtado and Carter model also examines the developmental transition itself, including the role of resource management and the balance between family support and strivings

for independence. Also, it incorporates variables directly related to the minority experience, the hostile climate, including experiences of discrimination and campus tension. Lastly, it places deserved importance on the student's sense of belonging. Students may adjust to the possibly hostile climate on campus, and they may experience no more than normal stress during the initial transition period. However, they will still be at high risk for attrition if they continue to feel on the outside of the campus community. A good fit within the campus community, a sense of belonging, is crucial to their persistence.

Suggestions for the future

In this last section I would like to discuss briefly some suggestions as to what we might do in postsecondary education to improve minority retention. Some of these suggestions are already being tried with varying degrees of success. Others are merely ideas and dreams, but I firmly believe that brainstorming is necessary to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse undergraduate (and graduate) student population.

To start with, the research community needs to take a look at what's going on in our nation's community colleges. Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) point out that currently "two-year institutions constitute about 28% of all U.S. colleges and universities and enroll about 37% of all students" (p.155). Most of the research that's been done in the past and is currently taking place is occurring in our four-year colleges and universities, using those students as subjects. Such research is valuable, surely, but it is not giving us the whole picture. If nearly 40% of undergraduate students in this country are enrolled in community colleges, then shouldn't more research take place in community college settings, utitlizing community college subjects? This would be much more likely to give us a complete and accurate picture of what is happening in the area of retention. And since minorities make up a large proportion of community college enrollment, research in this setting would help us determine more effective methods for promoting minority retention.

It is understandable that little research has been done to date in this setting. Traditionally, community college faculty do little research; they are too busy teaching a full slate of classes.

Plus, they are often underpaid and overworked. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) have pointed out, with such a large percentage of their students attending only part-time, community college faculty and administrators find it more difficult to study their own students than students in the subject pool at four-year colleges. Moreover, community colleges rarely have the money to put into research. However, such research is urgently needed. How do we encourage community college students to persist? How do we encourage community college students to make the decision to transfer to four-year institutions? What is it that promotes a good "fit" for the community college student? As noted previously, these questions are particularly important for minority students who make up a large contingent of the community college population.

Another aspect of retention that has been overlooked is the new distance learning approach. Advances in technology make it possible for students to take classes at home on their computers or watch classroom presentations on their TVs. This presents an entirely new dilemma for retention researchers. Is it possible to create a good "fit" with a college when the only connection is technological? How then do we encourage these students to persist? Research is badly needed in this area, as more and more students are choosing this route to an education.

Within the four-year college setting, there are relatively simple things that can be done to assist the minority student in his/her adjustment to college. It is appropriate to encourage students to maintain their attachment to significant people from home. This applies to nonminority students, as well as minority students. Unfortunately, colleges have believed for the past twenty years that successful college adjustment was dependent on the student's separation from family and friends back home. However, Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that connections to home "are key for the successful transition of students to college," and have a significant impact "on their academic and intellectual development, and on their academic performance and commitments" (p. 140). Kenny and Stryker (1996) found similar results, stressing that continuing family support may be especially important for minority students. It seems important for colleges/universities not only to find ways of helping students fit in but also to encourage continuing family support. Freshman

seminar programs that provide information on adjustment issues would be ideally suited for educating students about the importance of continuing contact with families.

An obvious way for institutions to encourage a better "fit" for minority students is to aggressively recruit minority students. Creating a larger social community within which the student can relate may be helpful in promoting adjustment. Minority students will certainly have less chance of feeling isolated and alienated if they are part of a larger group. There will be less chance for the minority student to find himself/herself the only ethnic minority student in a class of 100 Anglo students. Plus, the presence of more minorities on campus will provide additional social opportunities, should a minority student choose to participate in ethnic organizations along with mainstream activities. An added benefit would be the richness that a diverse community can bring to all students, faculty, and staff on campus.

Institutions would be advised also to be aggresive in recruiting minority faculty and staff members. Not only do they provide role models for minority students, but also a diverse faculty can be effective in combating racial prejudice in all sectors of the campus. In addition, administrator and faculty attitudes are important in setting the racial climate on campus. Hurtado (1994) reported that Latino students perceived less racial tension and fewer experiences of discrimination when they believed administrators were open and willing to listen to student concerns. Her study also demonstrated that students rated their campuses low on hostility when they perceived that faculty cared about student development.

Predominantly White colleges might want to take a good look at predominantly Black colleges. Black colleges have traditionally had excellent retention records. They have created comfortable campus environments where students report feeling a real sense of community and positive adjustment. Students often report a good "fit". This contributes to the likelihood of persistence toward a degree (Pascarella, Smart, Ethington, & Nettles, 1987). These sister colleges may well have ideas to share with predominantly White colleges when it comes to minority student retention.

Orientation programming can be a useful retention tool for students of all ethnic backgrounds (Robbins & Smith, 1993). Nearly 80% of all colleges in the U.S. have some type of freshman orientation in place on their campuses. Many are moving from three-day programs to courses that last 1-2 semesters. Course content varies from managing stress to locating college resources to honing study skills. By far the most important byproduct is the support network that occurs among participants in individual classes. Students have the opportunity to get to know a small group of students who are struggling with similar issues and decisions. Common bonds are forged. It actually makes little difference what is taught; it is the informal interactions that occur among students and between teacher and student that are important. This can make a dramatic difference in the student's sense of community and "fit" within the campus setting.

As might be expected, universities and colleges have faced problems in instituting retention programs. This was particularly true back in the 1970's when the first substantial push for freshman programming was introduced. Curriculum committees had difficulty determining what material should be covered in such courses, deciding whether the courses should be taken for credit and how much credit should be awarded, even who should teach these courses. Also, when faculty were approached to add such a course to already full teaching schedules, they were understandably reluctant to do so, particularly without statistics indicating the validity of freshman orientation courses. After 25 years of documented positive effects on retention, administrators are finding it somewhat easier to justify this type of programming. There may always be hassles associated with any new programming. Still, substantial increases in retention rates are certainly worth the effort it takes to introduce new programs into the curriculum.

The Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition program at the University of South Carolina has tracked freshman programming and subsequent retention results at participating colleges all of the United States for nearly 20 years. Their published results verify the benefits of such programming (Fidler, 1991; Fidler & Hunter, 1989). Of course, factors other than freshman programming also affect retention (i.e., the availability of financial aid, the effectiveness of developmental and remedial coursework, goal commitment, etc.), but these are beyond the scope

of this paper. It should be noted, however, that retention researchers have only recently become aware of possible differences in retention factors for minority students. Most of the research to date has been done on freshman populations as a whole, and most of the studies have involved predominantly White universities and colleges. As mentioned previously, little research has been done on two- and four-year community college campuses, where minority students comprise a particularly large proportion of enrolled students. Future research is especially needed in this area.

Conclusion

Our undergraduate population is rapidly changing. Students are getting older, choosing to go to school part-time, taking on jobs while they study. An economic shift is also occurring: jobs of the future will increasingly be high-technology jobs that will require college degrees and further advanced training. With the dramatic increases in minority populations, these specialized jobs will have to draw from the pool of all ethnic groups. As the overall minority population is increasing, by extension the minority undergraduate population is providing an increased proportion of the enrollment in postsecondary institutions. As discussed previously, while colleges have made tremendous strides in retention efforts during the past 20 years, retention of minority students is still a concern because minority attrition remains much higher than that of Anglos.

The outlook for the future for minority students, institutions of higher education, and the economy in general is on shifting sand. Research has provided the foundation for many of the programs already in place to promote student retention, but much is left to be done. It is imperative that researchers in higher education enlarge their focus to include serious retention efforts for minorities. Four-year institutions must be willing to direct serious efforts toward research on community college campuses. Four- and two-year programs must work together to create a good "fit" for a rich diversity of students. All colleges and universities must take even more seriously the mandate to educate all of our country's students, Anglo and minority alike. The very future of our country depends on it, and so does the future of our public universities and colleges.

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